



Children's access to play in school

National Adaption Plans

Field research

Austria

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National Adaption Plan – Field Research – key findings

1. Database

The database consists of members of two focus groups, held on March 16th and April 24th, 2018.

There were different stakeholders in both events:

First focus group March 16th, 2018 (5 participants):

- one head teacher from a primary school
- three teachers from a primary school
- one social pedagogue from a primary school

Second focus group April 24th, 2018 (10 participants):

- two head teachers from primary schools
- two parents from primary school kids
- three teachers from a primary school for special needs
- three social pedagogues from a primary school

2. Research method

Altogether 13 participants contributed to both focus group meetings.

The design of this meetings followed

1. Introductory round – introductions, “my relationship to learning, teaching and education”
2. Presentation of the project (OPAL programme, Michael Follett’s work, sample video showing playtime at schools, sharing experiences from the UK study trip)
3. Information about the National Adaptation Plan
4. Focus group: 1st Topic: Value of play 2nd topic: Challenges for a “play friendly school”, 3rd topic: Fields of action in the framework of the school 4th topic: Need for support, that might be given during CAPS project

3. Key findings from field research

Main Value of play – based on the Value Triangle proposed by Holden 2006 – is seen in the Instrumental Value of Play. To support the mental and physical development of the child, the improvement in communication and social learning and other related items are seen as most beneficial for children when playing. Some responded also to the Institutional Value, as play supports children concentrate while their lessons. The Intrinsic value was not mentioned directly.

Challenges for a play friendly schools can be seen in structural and personal factors, while the first mentioned seems to be more difficult to overcome. The

play does not always fit into the school curricula, Health and Safety Regulations are strict and School authorities are sceptical if play fits into schools.

Personal factors can be seen within different groups, as parents, teachers&school staff and Children. Especially parents see good marks as the most important outcome of their children´s school time and play for them seems to be a waste of time. There are also some legal concerns on liability issues to overcome if children get hurt. Teacher and school staff may also not see play as a form of serious learning, what they are committed to. Not all children are eager to play, especially if they are addicted to Computer games, they might not like to stay outside.

Various fields of intervention are seen, at the level of the Children, school management, school staff, parents, and environment. Children need time and permission to play, which has to be provided and self-organized assemblies are seen as helpful to create and agree on common rules. School Management is important, as play needs a strong commitment Top-down. This can be shown by written commitment letters, suitable principles in-house rules and via PR-activities.

The whole school staff (including canteen personnel and caretaker) has to be involved in a playful school, especially teachers should be trained to facilitate self-directed play. Parents have to be informed and convinced and ideally volunteer in supporting play. The first step to improve the environment is to reduce dangers from facilities, building, and environment.

Need for support is mainly seen in the assessment of the status quo, the formulation of an action plan and guidance and consultation in the change process to improve play. A special interest was formulated into the OPAL Programme.

3.1. Value of play

Most answers referred to the instrumental value of play (see Holden 2006; Beunderman 2910):

- Play supports the development of the children, mental and physically
- Play stimulates the imagination
- Play improves social learning, dealing with each other in a fair way
- Play helps children making their own rules
- Play improves communication
- The play is a way to learn Empathy, it helps to compromise

These answers are all aimed, that Children develop a sense of competence. As children play with materials, they have the opportunity to make things happen or change things; thus, they experience some control over their world. Because they are in control when they play, they generally choose materials and activities for which they have some skills or interest, so they are comfortable. Their play experiences are successful, so their confidence is enhanced.

At a time in life when they have limited control over their world, it is important for young children to experience situations that they can control. These are essential experiences for the development of self-esteem, autonomy, and responsibility.

Children are able to practice skills. The practice involves the repetition of both physical skills and mental skills. Almost every skill is new when you are a child, so the repetition is actually an enjoyable experience. Each practice can lead to a new or more elaborate skill, so the interest remains high for children.

Children are able to develop socially. Even though young children do not play with peers for a number of years, their early play is often with adults and with materials, and near other children. Without the opportunity to play with others, children would not have the experiences they need to build social concepts and skills.

Children are able to solve problems and make decisions in a safe situation. That nonliteral quality of play—the freedom to pretend to be or do anything—provides the context for trying out adult roles, solving problems, and making decisions without any real consequences, so it's safe to take risks. Children are comfortable in those situations and can develop the skills needed when they feel safe. It's an opportunity to try out different roles and experience different situations.

Children express emotions, release tension, and explore anxiety-producing situations in play. Sometimes through vigorous physical play and sometimes through pretend play, children are able to let adults know what they are feeling. They may not be able to label or tell us about their fear of monsters, but they can show it as they pretend to be ferocious monsters or to run away from the monsters. Children can't tell us that they're frustrated, but they can express it by banging cymbals together or playing a very bossy adult to their dolls. Play allows one to express the full gamut of emotions—joy, pleasure, pain, frustration, anger, and exhilaration (see Driscoll/Nagel 2010)

The institutional value is expressed by the following answers:

- Play supports children to be more concentrated while they have to attend lessons
- Play helps to have a relaxing lunchtime

This aspect is also seen by the participants of the focus groups but plays a minor role in relation to the instrumental value of play.

The intrinsic value of play was not mentioned directly by the focus group members. Even if they might acknowledge the importance of intrinsic motivation for play, there was no direct quote concerning the intrinsic value of play. As they all have well-defined roles within the school system, they maybe couldn't express something, that is not directly related to the school system but to the society in general.

3.2. Challenges for play friendly schools

Discussing Challenges for play friendly schools is a very wide field, where each participant has personal experiences. It seems, that there is a lot of resistance within the school system, that hinders self-directed play. The members of the

focus group say structural challenges as the dominant points and a lot of different challenges on a personal level with parents, school staff, and children.

Structural factors

- The play does not fit into the school curricula
- Health and safety regulations are strict and it's risky to let children play
- We do not have a fitting environment for play
- School authorities don't want us to let the children play
- Missing Resources

Most teachers seem to agree, that including play in school curriculum is a necessary condition for ensuring the development of young children. However, the different understanding of "Play" makes it difficult. As some participants more believe in "playful learning", others see the importance of child-led activities within the school curriculum.

Headteachers and regular teachers feel legal aspects as a burden. Health and Safety Regulations are strict and it's not so easy to take responsibility for play within school premises. This is connected to the often missing environment for play in Austrian Schools. Not all schools have an outdoor playground, schoolyards are often dedicated to certain sports activities.

Teachers also miss a commitment of the School Authority, when they support children's play and that they don't have enough resources to facilitate play during break time and afternoon.

Personal factors

Besides the predominant structural factors, focus group members also mention personal factors, mainly concerning parents and other teachers (school staff), children are not so much in the focus.

- Parents
 - o Pressure to give good marks
 - o Pressure to offer workshops during leisure time
 - o Legal concern on liability issues
- Teacher & school staff
 - o Perception, that school has to be a place of serious learning
 - o Play bans as a disciplinary measure
 - o Hierarchy problems
- Children
 - o don't know how to play without (computer) games
 - o Aren't interested in Play
 - o too much quarrel

Parents are seen as a critical group, as they always run for good marks of their children. This is needed to be able to choose a "good" lower secondary school. This may lead to skepticism against autonomous play, as some parents see this as a "waste of time" and a leisure activity, that should be done after school. Some parents also want the school to support children in Music, Arts, and Performance, which should be trained instead of self-directed play.

Another aspect is, that in case of injuries, there might be some liability issues, that makes it a bit risky for the teacher to have supervision of the play.

Concerning teacher and school staff, Play is not always recognized as a serious activity, because it is "too joyful". So some teacher ban play, if there are some disciplinary problems with the pupils. Some teacher also feel unsafe, if they have to supervise play, as they don't see clear rules to follow.

On the other hand, also some children are not used in self-directed play. If they do a lot of computer games at home, they sometimes don't want to stay outdoor or to run and move, they are simply not interested in that kind of play. If kids are not used to playing, they sometimes quarrel and fight too much.

3.3. Fields for intervention

The different fields of intervention were discussed based on the different stakeholders. Starting with the children in the center, the school management, school staff, parents and the environment was analyzed to find possible changes, to improve the status quo.

Children:

- Provide time for play
- give Permission to play
- support self-determined play
- organize assembly with pupils
- create and agree on common rules

As most important point (and also quite difficult one), focus group members mentioned the provision of time for play, which is not so easy in some of the schools. As there are is a strict curriculum to follow for the morning classes and also many non-binding offers in the afternoon, it needs a clear commitment for Play from the headteacher.

Permission to Play is also a crucial issue. Many schools do not allow their kids to run or to be noisy at school premises, as this could interfere other classes. Support of self-determined play is closely related. As teachers are used to leading all activities from their pupils, it needs a different mindset and culture in schools to facilitate self-determined play.

To organize assemblies with pupils or even to let pupils organize their assemblies is an option to involve children in the decision-making process and to agree on common rules.

School Management

- written commitment to support play
- integrate suitable principles into house rules and school statute
- networking with other schools on this topic
- create visibility for "Play friendly School"
- usage for PR issues

School Management, especially the head teacher plays a crucial role in implementing a Play friendly school. To have a binding and visible document, a written commitment to support play would be a good opportunity to demonstrate this for whole school staff.

It's also important to integrate suitable principle into house rules or even into the school statute, as this makes it clear for all involved people (staff, parents, and children), that play is not only allowed but actively supported and this is part of schools mission.

It's also very helpful, if more schools work together in supporting play, as this makes it easier to communicate the importance of play and to overcome difficulties in daily school life.

Schools also can communicate their play friendliness and use this as an added value in attracting future pupils.

School staff

- involvement of all staff members (eg. canteen personnel, caretaker, etc.)
- activation of volunteers to support staff members
- nomination of a responsible person ("Play Coordinator")
- training to facilitate play
- set up of comprehensive quality criteria for play

Besides teachers and social pedagogues, it's also important to involve all staff members to facilitate play, as also the canteen personnel or the caretakers influence school activities with their cooperation and permission to play.

An additional source for help can be found with volunteers (regularly parents) that are willing to support the school to become more playful.

For teachers and social pedagogues, it is important, to have a specific training on facilitating play, as this is normally not part of the regular teacher training curriculum. Often there is also a lack of knowledge, that hinders teacher in supporting staff.

It is also very helpful to have a set of comprehensive quality criteria for each school, as this makes aims and goals visible for a Playful School and also gives hints for corrective actions.

Parents

- information for parents about the importance of play
- convincing parents about the benefits of play
- involvement of parents in change process for "Play friendly school" to gain their commitment

Even if parents are not present in daily school life, their influence can't be overestimated. As many of them are very ambitious related to the school career of their children, they tend to force the school to extend their teaching to the maximum possible as they hope for good marks to have a bigger choice for the following school. In Austria, the final grades in primary school are important for the acceptance of dedicated lower secondary grade schools.

So also parents have to be informed about the importance of play and to be convinced about the benefits so that they give their full support to the school and their children.

An appropriate approach for this aims is to involve parents in the change process to improve Play at school.

Environment

- reduce dangers from facilities, building, and environment
- use nature for outdoor play
- build a playground if there is enough space

Regularly the school staff itself has not too much influence on the school premises and the environment, as all the real estate is managed centralized by the school authority. But still, there enough possibilities to improve.

A first and important step is the evaluation and reduction of dangers from facilities in school so that children have a safe environment for play. If there is a possibility to use the schoolyard for outdoor play or even the possibility to use some space as a playground, this would make a great change for the better.

3.4. Need for support

Members of the focus group were very interested in the topics of the project. Need for support was seen in the following fields:

- Assessment of Status Quo
- Formulation of an action plan
- Guidance and consultation in the change process
- Know how transfer from OPAL-Programme and from other countries.
- Input for parents meeting

Even if a school feels very confident in their approach to Play, they are interested in someone external, who assesses the Status Quo. Also to support schools in the formulation of an action plan and to guide and consult the change process was mentioned as a very helpful support.

A special interest was formulated into the OPAL – Outdoor Play and Learning Programm from Michael Follett and into the experience from other countries.

Also mentioned was a support through an Input at parents meetings.

3.5. Any other topics

- Play should be part of the teacher training courses
- School autonomy should be increased to make it easier to focus on Play or other important topics.
- Schools suffer from a high bureaucratic workload, so it's important for them not to have additional obligations if they are interested to cooperate with the project.

Sources:

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